

## **Bob and Sam at the *Kabuki***

I was invited to go to the kabuki theatre, so I went.

I don't know much about the tradition of kabuki theatre. I don't even know the basic stories of the most well-known plays. If you ask me, it's a bit of a shame to go see something when you've got absolutely no idea what's going on. Watching "The Godfather" as a child was like that. As it is, I'm not really keen on tales of feuds. I just can't remember who's on whose side and who wants what in all the conflict. To make matters worse, all the Italians looked the same to me, and some guy who was supposed to have died kept on reappearing. All I really got out of it was that the mafia use horse heads for revenge.

Therefore, to avoid this kind of situation, I do some research beforehand into the story of the play. In addition, I drill the names of the actors into my brain. Kabuki actors are constantly changing their stage names, so you have to keep your wits about you.

Sitting in the theatre, I notice a couple of young white guys sitting a few rows in front of me. They both have closely cropped hair, and even though it's the middle of winter, they're both wearing white short-sleeved T-shirts. The arms sticking out of those sleeves are as thick as thighs.

Soon, the play begins. A country merchant goes to the pleasure district of Yoshiwara in olden-day Tokyo and falls in love at first sight with an upper-class courtesan. He visits her frequently, eventually gaining a social standing sufficient to be able to buy the courtesan her freedom from her employer, only for her to betray him. That's how the story goes. The courtesan is currently played by the most popular of female-character actors, and is absolutely beautiful.

While I was watching, all of a sudden, I became concerned about whether those two guys understood this story. You can listen to an audio guide in English, so they were probably fine. But how do you say Japanese expressions like *miuke* in English? In my head, I have a go at trying to explain this to them: "Well, an *oiran* is like a high-class prostitute, er, but when I say prostitute, it really means something almost like a celebrity, although they actually worked in places known as tea houses, but of course they weren't really selling tea, and then, you know, there was this thing

called a *nenki*..." It's hopeless. I can't keep up with the story. In my mind's eye, the two guys exchange puzzled looks and shrug.

I try to return my attention to the stage, but now the thought has entered my mind, I can't stop myself from wondering for every single thing: What do those two make of this? In my mind, one of them points at the courtesan's feet, "Hey look, Bob, are those shoes or boxes?" he says. "On that note, Sam, what on earth are those sticks poking out from her head like guns on a battleship?" the other one adds. "And why do all the men have their heads shaved down the middle? Is it a religious thing?" The courtesan unceremoniously dumps the country merchant, the merchant slays her in vengeance, and the whole time those two guys in my head are chattering so much I can't concentrate.

The first play ends, followed by an intermission, and then a dance performance begins. The two guys that were sitting a few rows in front have left without me noticing, but it's already too late. Bob and Sam are now stuck in my head, and they have taken control of my eyes and brain.

Watching through the eyes of Bob-Sam, the classic performance of *Yakko Dojoji* becomes an ultra avant-garde *butoh* dance. A white-painted figure alternately becomes a woman, then a man, and dances the jitterbug with people in white costumes whose heads are painted shiny blue. Then suddenly, an army of what looks like cartoon villains holding branches of "Cherry blossom!" attacks, but one by one the dancer knocks them flat without even laying a finger on them. Next, something descends from above. "Is that a bell? Or is it a cauldron?" She climbs right on top of it and for some reason looks incredibly pleased with herself. The end. "Mysterious!", "Fantastic!!"

That's all well and good, but what's bothering me is that even though it's been several months since I went to the theatre, Bob-Sam just won't go home. Every now and then when they encounter something unfamiliar, it's, "Wow! What's that?!" and they want me to explain it. New Year's rice cakes, squat toilets, the Onbashira pillar-riding festival: explaining all this stuff for a newbie is a real pain.

One more thing: I want them to do something about those short sleeves. It's snowing outside. If they keep wearing that, what are we going to do when summer gets here?

## **Me in July**

### **I.**

When peaches come into season, I eat peaches. I eat nothing but peaches.

Peaches are delicious. I can't think of any better description than that. Peaches exist purely for that reason, to be delicious. In fact, they are so damned delicious that it makes me uneasy.

From a human's point of view, aren't peaches just a little too perfect? Bursting with sweet juicy flesh inside that thin skin, "Please eat me!" they urge. It's just too good to be true. Surely, they must be hiding something.

Of course, there are other fruits that specialise in being delicious. Take strawberries, for example. Strawberries are wonderful too. Plus, they've kindly made themselves easy to eat by not having any thick peel or bothersome big seeds, and are a tempting bright red. They are begging to be eaten. That little stalk on top is obviously there just to make them easy to pick up and eat.

Even so, perhaps peaches seem so much more suspicious because there's something vaguely human about them. The colour, the form, the downy soft hair on the skin: these all somehow resemble a human baby. It feels almost immoral to eat such flesh.

I often think about these kinds of things, but when I actually have a peach in front of me, rational thoughts evaporate in an instant. When I'm eating a peach there's nothing in my brain but the taste and the scent and the feel of it, and the sound of my own voice squealing, "Peach! Peach! Peach! Whoo hoo hoo!!!" Peaches are trouble.

### **II.**

First, gently pick it up by cupping both hands around it from underneath. Bring it to your nose and inhale the fragrance to your heart's content. Sniff and sniff and sniff. Thereafter, tilt it this way and that in your hands, as though admiring a fine teacup, appreciating its colour and form. Savour

the exquisite cleft, the velvety down. Lastly, raise the peach up high towards the heavens and offer thanks, then tenderly place it back in its original position, and gently bow once to acknowledge it. Repeat several times a day.

Novices beware: no matter how soft that downy fuzz may look, you must refrain from rubbing it against your cheek. A childhood friend of mine had her face swell up from unwittingly rubbing one on her skin. This is the friend who also managed to get her butt stuck in a large round sugar tin and couldn't get it off, by the way.

### III.

I wonder if somewhere a religion exists devoted to the worship of peaches. The fact is, when I eat a peach, in my brain I'm one of a thousand humble followers gathering around a gigantic peach idol and crying out "Huzzah!!" as we throw ourselves to the ground in adoration. Doing some research on this, I came across a scandalous fact: in the folktale of Momotaro as it is now known, a boy is born to a childless elderly couple by emerging from a peach that comes floating down the river, but in olden times the story was different. In the version from the Edo period, the old man and woman eat the peach, and thanks to its restorative powers they once again enjoy the vigour of youth, and *that's* how the boy is born. However, I am still unable to confirm the existence of a peach religion.

### IV.

Soon the season for peaches will draw to a close. I'm trying to gradually prepare myself for the impending separation. I face the peach in front of me and say, "Soon we must part." Or I plead, "Don't leave me!" Or I promise, "I'll always protect you," and so on.

I've no idea what I would be protecting it from. Maybe from the clueless cashier who dumps something on top of the peaches at the supermarket checkout.

Time to eat another peach.

## **Three Things My Dad Said**

### 1. “Why do you always interfere like that?”

At my family home there was a narrow pathway connecting the carport and the garden, with an iron gate in the middle. One day, I saw there was a plastic lid off a clothing storage box propped against it. This was back when I was still an office worker. Thinking it was just junk, I moved it aside. It was then that my dad said those words to me.

Since some years earlier, there had been a huge toad living in the garden. Big enough to fill both hands, its body was a light brown and its sides were striped black and white. It was grotesque. But every spring the same toad would appear from somewhere, probably after wintering over someplace in the garden, and on a summer’s evening we would watch it sitting motionless in the twilight, flicking its tongue out from time to time to catch bugs, and somehow we all became fond of it, particularly my dad, who referred to it as “our toad.”

The thing my dad worried about most was, “What if our toad escapes from the gap under the garden gate and gets run over?” (When we had had a cat, it was always, “What if the cat runs away when there’s an earthquake and gets lost?” He would have tied it up with a rope to keep it from harm if we hadn’t stopped him.) So that plastic lid had been put there by my dad to prevent such an occurrence. Hence his words. I get why he said it, but I wasn’t all that happy about it.

Anyway, the toad lived on for another three years, until one day we found it dead in a puddle of water in a hollow of the garden. My dad said, “I’m not touching that freaky thing,” so I scooped it up with both hands and buried it. The slippery skin felt disgusting. I wasn’t all that happy about it.

### 2. “It’s not Kotaro’s fault.”

One time I got bitten by our dog. It was back when I was still living at home, and I was eating at the dinner table when the dog came and sat by my feet. He was like a bottomless pit, that dog, forever hanging around any time anybody ate anything, drooling with slobber. I ignored him and

was continuing with my meal when I inadvertently stepped on his tail. The dog let out a yelp, leapt up, and sank his teeth into my knee. The following day, the two distinct holes left there by his fangs were filled with pus, and my right leg was inflamed and swollen. I went downstairs, looking like a wounded soldier, and at the sight of me, those were my father's words. Kotaro was the name of our dog.

At the hospital I endured an extremely painful tetanus shot, followed by a lecture to "make more effort to clean your dog's teeth properly."

After Kotaro died, my dad hung a portrait photo of him in the living room and performed the traditional daily rites of lighting incense and saying a prayer. After he observed the 49 days of mourning, he was done with it.

### 3. "It's schmushy"

Whenever stuff like food was overly soft, my dad would always use this word, "schmushy," but I've never heard anybody other than him use it. At first, I thought it must be regional dialect, but when I asked relatives from where he grew up, they replied, "Nope, never heard of it."

All the same, my younger sister and I have come to like it, and we still often use the word now, even though he has passed away.

"This one's a bit schmushy, isn't it?"

"I like my pumpkin simmered till it's schmushy."

"I feel like my skin is getting a bit schmushy here."

"Schmushy."

"Schmushy."

"Schmushy."

(Kishimoto Sachiko, from *Himitsu No Shitsumon*, 2019, Chikuma Shobou Publishers)